

Erik Larson Biography

Source: www.litlovers.com



Often times, truth is indeed stranger than fiction. Take the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, Illinois. The fair was the groundbreaking birthplace of such things as neon lights and the Ferris Wheel; a wonderland of futuristic technology and architecture. It was also the playground of a demented murderer who set up his very own chamber of torture within striking distance of the fair. This bizarre dichotomy of creation and destruction is what enticed Erik Larson to tell the twisted tale of the 1893 World's Fair in his fascinating fourth book *Devil in the White City*:

Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America.

Journalist Larson's work displays a fascination with the ways various forms of violence affect every day life. His second book *Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun* is an exploration of gun culture throughout American history, using a horrendous incident involving a machine-gun toting 16-year old as its unifying thread. His next book, the gripping, critically acclaimed *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History*, detailed one of the worst natural disasters in American history, a hurricane that hit Galveston Texas in 1900 leaving between 6,000 and 10,000 people dead.

When Larson completed *Isaac's Storm* and began researching ideas for his next book, he began reading about the 1853 World's Fair. Hooked by the numerous colorful characters and amazing occurrences surrounding the fair, Larson decided he would use it as the subject for his fourth book. Still, he had little interest in telling a straight chronological play-by-play of the fair's creation. So, he resolved to revisit the subject that had so repulsed him prior to writing *Isaac's Storm*.

Erik Larson lives in Seattle with his wife, three daughters, a Chinese fighting fish, a dwarf hamster, and a golden retriever named Molly.

Book Summary

Source: www.urbanbooks.net

Erik Larson has been widely acclaimed as a master of narrative non-fiction, and in his new book, the bestselling author of *Devil in the White City* turns his hand to a remarkable story set during Hitler's rise to power.

The time is 1933, the place, Berlin, when William E. Dodd becomes America's first ambassador to Hitler's Germany in a year that proved to be a turning point in history.

A mild-mannered professor from Chicago, Dodd brings along his wife, son, and flamboyant daughter, Martha. At first Martha is entranced by the parties and pomp, and the handsome young men of the Third Reich with their infectious enthusiasm for restoring Germany to a position of world prominence. Enamored of the "New Germany," she has one affair after another, including with the surprisingly honorable first chief of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels. But as evidence of Jewish persecution mounts, confirmed by chilling first-person testimony, her father telegraphs his concerns to a largely indifferent State Department back home. Dodd watches with alarm as Jews are attacked, the press is censored, and drafts of frightening new laws begin to circulate. As that first year unfolds and the shadows deepen, the Dodds experience days full of excitement, intrigue, romance—and ultimately, horror, when a climactic spasm of violence and murder reveals Hitler's true character and ruthless ambition.

Suffused with the tense atmosphere of the period, and with unforgettable portraits of the bizarre Göring and the expectedly charming—yet wholly sinister—Goebbels, *In the Garden of Beasts* lends a stunning, eyewitness perspective on events as they unfold in real time, revealing an era of surprising nuance and complexity. The result is a dazzling, addictively readable work that speaks volumes about why the world did not recognize the grave threat posed by Hitler until Berlin, and Europe, were awash in blood and terror. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

Source: www.LitLovers.com

1. William Dodd went to Germany believing that Hitler would have a positive

influence on Germany. Why were so many at first enamored of Nazism and willing “to give Hitler everything he wants”?

2. How would you describe German society at the time of the Dodd Family’s arrival in Berlin? Talk about the ways in which Germany appeared to be a modern, civilized society...and, of course, the way in which that appearance was at odds with reality.

3. What was it that made Dodd begin to suspect the rumors he had been hearing about Nazi brutality were true?

4. Why did Dodd’s—and numerous others’—warnings about Hitler fall on indifferent ears in the US? What was the primary concern of the US in its relationship with Germany? Was the US stance one of purposeful ignorance...or of sheer disbelief?

5. Did America’s own anti-semitism play any role in dismissing the growing chorus of concern ?

6. What do you think of William Dodd? What about him do you find admirable? Were you mildly amused or impressed by his sense of frugality?

7. What was Dodd’s reputation among the “old hands” at the State Department? What role does class play in how he was viewed by his diplomatic peers?

8. What about Martha? What do you find in her character to admire...or not? Did she purposely allow herself to be blinded by Udet and Rudolf Diels...or was she truly dazzled by their charms? Her promiscuity could have made her a serious liability. Were you surprised that her parents seemed untroubled by her multiple love affairs, or that they didn’t try to reign in her behavior?

9. How does Erik Larson portray Hitler in his book? Does he humanize him...or present him as a monster? How does he depict Goebbels and Goering...and other higher-ups in the Nazi party?

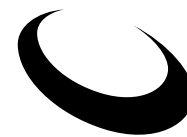
10. How does the fact that you know the eventual outcome of Nazi Germany affect the way you experience the book? Does foreknowledge heighten...or lessen the story’s suspense. Either way...why?

11. What were events/episodes you find most chilling in Larson’s account of the rise of Nazism?

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In the Garden of Beasts by Erik Larson



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